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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how to determine the learning style of a child with learning problems and how to use the information to maximize the child's potential. Assessing the child's learning style begins with close observation in a variety of settings, which provides a generalized idea of the child's behavior. This is followed up by categorizing some of the child's characteristics or preferences, which involves analyzing: (1) environmental influences, including physical and biological aspects; (2) perceptual preferences, to determine the senses children emphasize in learning; (3) social preferences, to evaluate whether a group or individual setting is best; and (4) motivational preferences, to analyze the desire for structured or non-structured situations. A section of do's and don'ts provides further suggestions for parents. A case study illustrates use of specialized tests to assess learning style and use of test results by parents and teachers. Also included in this periodical issue is a description of a support program for siblings of children with disabilities, developed by the Phoenix Children's Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona. (JDD)

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LEARNING STYLES



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Linda Murphy

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Over the past decade much has been written about the validity of individuals having definite preferences in the ways they learn. It has been now documented by researchers in the field that each of us has a unique cognitive fingerprint, so to speak, based on biological and developmental characteristics that dictate or influence the ways we acquire information.

This becomes apparent if you stop and consider your own work or study habits. Do you, for example, need complete silence to concentrate or do you work best with background noise or music?

Is it necessary for you to take notes or make lists so that you don't forget, or do you remember best if you hear things said out loud? Are you a night owl, or do you work best in the early a.m.?

Do you work better alone, or do you shine in groups? Where and how do you put forth your best efforts—sprawled on a couch or the floor, work spread out, or seated at a desk, pencils sharpened, work arranged neatly? Do you hate details but readily grasp the big picture or vice-versa? Do deadlines pressure you or do you thrive on definite schedules and routine?

Believe it or not, all of the above factors and many more like them indicate your specific learning style. In all probability these characteristics have been ingrained since childhood! Your offspring also has his or her own learning style, just as you do. Identifying your child's learning style can make life much easier at home and school; this is especially true if your youngster has special needs. Children with learning problems face needless frustration when information is presented to them in ways that do not mesh with their individual learning preferences. In this issue we will focus on how to determine your youngster's learning style and how to use this information to maximize your child's potential.

Assessing your child's learning style

The best way to determine your child's learning style is through close observation and in a variety of settings. Watch her and jot down how she functions during the a.m. or p.m. hours. Observe her behavior in quiet or noisy environments, what she does in groups or alone, and try to judge her attention span. Does she flit from

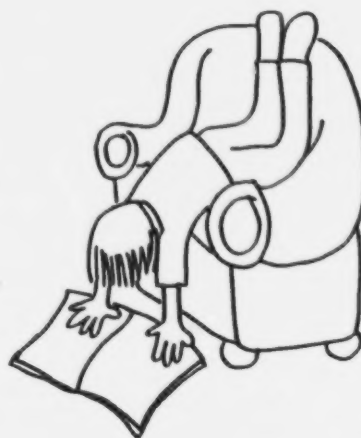
one activity to another or does she focus on one thing at a time? Does she respond well to verbal directions or is she a paper and pencil person? Once you have a **generalized** idea of your youngster's behavior the next thing is to see if you can categorize some of her characteristics or preferences.

Environmental preferences

There are both physical and biological aspects to the environment that can influence the way your youngster learns.

The physical preferences include: noise level; lighting; temperature; placement, i.e. at a desk. Using the information gathered from your observation period, you should be able to tell if your child functions best with background noise or if this makes her jittery. Does she prefer bright, well-lit environments or darkened rooms with cozy lamplight? Does hot weather make her edgy or does she flourish as the temperature climbs? Perhaps she is indifferent to climate at all.

Do you find her doing school work sprawled on the floor or tucked in bed, incapable of doing her best work at a desk? Your observations will give you definite guidelines on how to adjust the environment to meet your child's physical learning needs. It is after all quite easy to adjust room temperatures, lighting fixtures, provide a quiet or noisy space, a cozy corner or even the floor for study, as the case may be.



Biological preferences refers to the inner rhythms that determine whether one is a morning person or a night owl. Most schools operate on the premise that children perform best in the morning and thus schedule most of the academics in the early a.m., leaving afternoon for such activities as music or art. However, your observations of your child might indicate a quite different energy level. Many children are slow starters, cranky in the mornings and more alert as the day wears on.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Linda Murphy, M.S., is the founder and for the past 15 years has been the director of a widely known, approved school for mentally handicapped children serving children ages 5-21 in Westchester County, NY, and surrounding areas. A lecturer, teacher and administrator, she is a foster parent and the parent of a handicapped child, too.

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Food intake is another important biological preference. Children who reject breakfast or pick at their meals probably have a metabolism that requires five or more snack-like intakes. These children should be encouraged to eat frequent nutritious snacks of fruit, nonsugary fruit juice, popcorn, raisins, etc. in order to enhance their performance. Unfortunately,

most school schedules do not lend themselves to meeting the needs of children with these metabolic preferences—but you can adjust things at home to make life easier. Encouraging a nutritious snack in the afternoon or permitting homework *after* supper for a night owl child are some examples of adjusting to your youngster's specific biological style.

Perceptual preferences

Perception refers to the various ways we take in information presented to us through our senses. This includes seeing, hearing, touching, sensing if things are hard, soft, hot or cold, reacting to pressure felt through our joints.

How perception influences learning can be described using a piece of chalk as an example:

- **visual—seeing** and remembering what the chalk looks like
- **auditory—hearing** how the chalk sounds as it goes across the blackboard
- **tactile—sensing** the way the chalk **feels** to the touch, in this case, hard and smooth
- **kinesthetic—sensing the pressure of the muscles and joints** when you use the piece of chalk to write.



This translates into a learning style by recognizing for example that the **visual learner** prefers the "look and say" method of learning how to read. This type of child relies heavily on the look or shape of things as they are presented—for instance, in flashcards. The **auditory or oral learner** does best with a phonics approach, sounding out the words, hearing the different vowel sounds, the consonant or beginning letters and blending sounds orally in order to figure out the word.

The **tactile learner** does best with tracing letters, then words, and the **kinesthetic learner**, in the initial stages of learning, might enjoy making letters out of sandpaper. Later on the **kinesthetic learner** relies on the physical act of writing things down in conjunction with using other senses.

Many children rely on one sense more than any of the others. If your child is confused by verbal directions, but remembers pictures or where things are located, she is probably more of a visual learner. Many visual learners report that they "see" the word in their minds photographically but are unaware of how the word is sounded out. If, on the other hand, your child remembers the verses of songs and

likes to recite, she is probably more of an oral learner.

If your youngster enjoys working with concrete objects and needs counters in order to compute arithmetic, she probably needs both visual and tactile, or touching, clues in order to acquire math skills.

The most effective learning stimulates *all* the senses. Kinder-

garteners and preschoolers march, sing, clap, use hand and finger play in order to learn. Most of us remember that rote recitation and writing over and over were necessary in order for us to acquire the basics. Knowing which sense your child prefers is helpful because it will guide you in emphasizing the strong points, while taking care to avoid the weaker areas.

Social preferences

This style refers to how your youngster reacts to situations when others are about. Some children are loners preferring to study by themselves and do best in a one-to-one environment, while others are challenged by the give-and-take of groups.

Group preference. If your child is easy to get along with, likes to socialize, is eager to play outside with neighborhood playmates and comments frequently about school friends, then the likelihood is that she prefers group situations. She undoubtedly voices her interest, empathy and desire to be with others. Group preference children learn best in cooperative, shared activity environments and shine at group projects.

Individual preference. If your child is rather strong willed and chooses pastimes or hobbies that do not involve others, then she probably leans towards an individual style. Often this type of child appears more self-confident than others and frequently has a strong sense of inner worth. Others sometimes perceive this tendency towards privacy as being secretive or stand-offish. A child with indi-

vidual preference traits often appears restless or withdrawn when in groups, and performs best when given the option of independent study. Determining your child's sociability level will help at home because you can cease forcing your individual preference child to invite others over or to participate in group outings.

Consulting your child's teacher is a good idea if school activities are not meshing with her sociability preferences.



Motivational preferences

Learning generally takes place in a setting that requires a fair amount of structure. Some children do best in a structured routine while others are motivated by an unstructured approach.

Structure. Determining who *needs* structure is readily apparent. Children who have short attention spans, are physically and verbally overactive, who are confused by choices and schedule changes require more structure than others. Unfortunately the children who require the most structure or **external controls** are often the ones who test the rules the most.

Children requiring structure need:

- definite, consistent rules
- realistic deadlines or a definite time frame
- specific guidelines with clear-cut instructions on how to complete activities
- positive approval
- parent and teacher attention and feedback

Teachers find these children do best if activities are of a definite duration. In school the same material should be presented in different ways and instruction should be broken down step-by-step. Concrete aids, using things that children can both see and then touch or feel are other motivational strategies.

Such children should be pushed gently into decision-making activities. Give them the chance to make one or two choices rather than presenting them with limitless opportunities which tend to confuse. At home parents should assign chores that can be completed within a definite time. Choose activities or games that have a satisfying sense of completion. Reading short, high interest stories

usually sparks interest and increases the attention span of the child who requires structure.

Non-structured. These children are characterized by their creativity, individuality and imaginative play. They usually grasp alternative ways of doing things and display a willingness to take risks without fearing failure. They often resent step-by-step sequential activities. Researchers who have determined differences in the structured and non-structured child note the latter are often more egocentric, talkative and oblivious to others.

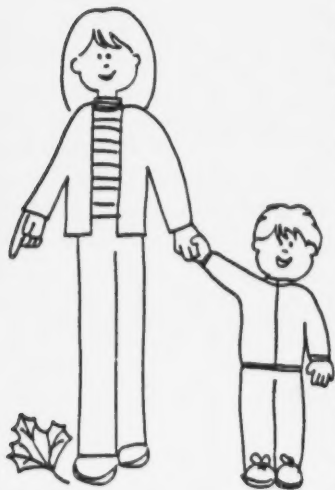
At school the non-structured child should be assigned long-range projects and allowed to select her own timetable and date of completion. This type of child thrives on participating in the planning stages and is often quite capable of making decisions. If assigned to a group project, she should be reminded to take an interest in others. Teachers find that material can be presented in a more abstract fashion. Often this type of child is so eager to go off on her own that she ignores important directions and thus makes needless mistakes.

At home the parent of the non-structured style child should provide her with choices, and expect her to participate in family meetings. Above all she should be prompted to listen and cooperate with others. Not unexpectedly this type of child is the sprawler—books, projects and clutter everywhere.

Once parents and teachers become aware of the many facets of each child's learning preference, schedules, activities and environments can be adjusted to increase achievement levels.



Do's and don'ts



Do remember that although some children's learning preferences are extreme and thus easily recognizable other children are a mixture of styles. Only careful observation of your child's habits will determine how you can best understand and help.

Do choose activities that stimulate and reinforce learning preferences. For example, if you are studying the weather:

- sing a weather song
- listen to the weather report together
- study a weather map
- go outside and observe what the weather is like
- paint a picture describing today's weather.

This way every sense has been touched upon.

Do match the time frame of any activity to your child's ability to sustain interest and attention.

Don't expect your child to live up to your preconceived notion of what is acceptable or unacceptable. Each child learns differently and at her own pace. Forcing her

to do otherwise only adds to the frustration.

Do stop trying to teach your child things she is not ready for. Use the precious time together to engage in activities where she can achieve success. This will motivate her to try something more challenging.

Do have faith in your child's abilities. Emphasize her strengths and describe her in positive terms such as artistic, generous, a good cooperater—anything that honestly fits the bill.

Don't dwell on your child's problems using such negatives as immature, learning disabled, slow, different. Different does not necessarily mean disabled.

Do share your observations with teachers and other professionals working with your child. Her likes, dislikes, talents, preferences, best times of day, food requirements and anything pertinent you have noted in your assessment are invaluable to those who are working towards helping your child succeed.

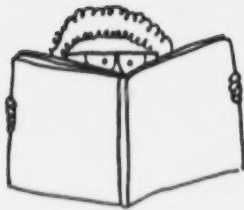
PARENT-TO-PARENT: The value of support groups for siblings of disabled children

The editors are pleased to share news of an outstanding sibling program developed by the Phoenix Children's Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona.

For many years professionals have maintained a fragmented view of families who have children with disabilities. Siblings especially have received scant attention. Recently there has been a growing interest in the experiences of persons who have brothers and sisters with disabilities. With this in mind, the Phoenix Children's Hospital Child Development Center has developed the Siblings Ex-

change Program, a support program for children who have siblings with disabilities.

The Siblings Exchange Program provides an opportunity for children to express and identify their needs and concerns and then begin to explore possible solutions to their conflicts. The program runs for 13 weeks at 1-1/2 hours per week with a curriculum based on enjoyable activities for the children followed by a discussion on their meaning. For example, the children play charades and when the game is over and everyone has had fun, the facilitator talks about how it applies to people. The pro-



gram gives the children an opportunity to recognize and understand concerns, assist in solving these concerns in a constructive manner and develop peer relations with other children who have disabled siblings. Some of the program topics include: self-esteem, disabling conditions, communication, handling others' reactions to disabilities and a question/answer time with a pediatrician.

In addition, a training manual has been developed as an outstanding teaching tool for schools, state agencies, hospitals and other organizations. It includes a review of the research, the necessity of a support program, developing a successful program, the curriculum, a sample budget and recommendations. The hospital is investigating publishing the manual to use for training in Arizona and other states.

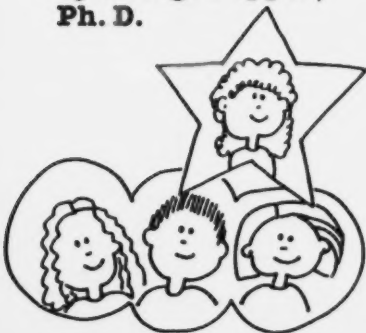
Since the beginning of the Siblings Exchange Program eight support groups have started in the Phoenix and Tucson areas. The hospital is working on extending the program to include meeting the needs of other family members as well. Presentations of the program are being made at conferences, in written articles and on talk shows in the hope of providing support to families everywhere. If you are interested in finding out more about the program, the training manual or training programs, please contact:

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PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER

How a learning styles assessment can help: a case study

**by George Popper,
Ph. D.**



This article will focus on how psychologists use specialized tests to assess a child's learning style and how the information obtained from such an assessment can be used by parents and in the classroom. To illustrate this we will use a case study based on a composite of the test results of actual children.

Harry is almost 12 years old, in the fifth grade and attends a special education class where he has been having problems; both his parents and teachers are concerned. They want to know more about the nature of Harry's difficulties and the most effective way to educate him and so he was referred for a comprehensive psychological/educational evaluation.

Harry was a normal baby whose developmental milestones (walk-

ing, talking, etc.) were delayed for some unknown reason. He has had many evaluations and has always been in a special education class. He is taking medication because he is hyperactive and has trouble paying attention. Harry takes a long time to get his homework done or to accomplish the simplest tasks. This has caused a considerable amount of consternation at home.

In order to assess learning style the psychologist must ask a number of important questions about the child's behavior during the evaluation. Was the child motivated to try? Did the child follow directions accurately? Was the child verbal and did the child interact spontaneously with the

examiner? What was the child's demeanor and approach to the test questions?

The first observation is that Harry seems to be a friendly child who is trying his best. Despite his efforts, however, he is having a great deal of difficulty responding to the examiner's questions. Although he is able to speak quite well, he can't seem to get his thoughts together enough to give a clear answer. Sometimes while trying to explain an answer, he ends up confusing himself so much that the question has to be repeated. His attention span and his ability to stay with a task are also limited. What are the implications for his teacher? Harry will probably have difficulty working independently and will need help in coping with multi-step tasks. Although he probably knows answers to particular questions, he will need to learn how to express himself so as to be understood. Rather than get angry with him when he gives an overly wordy response, Harry's teacher will constantly need to remind him to stay on the topic.

As it turns out, the psychological tests reveal that Harry's ability to express his thoughts improves when he is forced to limit his responses to one or two word answers. This is important for the

teacher to know since Harry might give someone the impression that he is more limited than he really is.

Not surprisingly, Harry has difficulty with anything that involves memory. Additional tests prove that Harry can learn when the information taught has some immediate relevance to him.

Some of the testing reveals that Harry has problems with sequencing; for example, he can't perform a series of tasks in a given order. As with other aspects of his functioning, this is important to know because Harry will very likely be confused if given more than one thing to do at a time. Possibly, some of the problems he has been having with homework assignments are due to this deficit.

Understanding a child's personality, how the child handles emotions and deals with stress is as important as an understanding of the child's language and math skills. Harry's tests reveal that he is an overly sensitive child who becomes easily overwhelmed when confronted with too many things at once. He doesn't really know how to handle his feelings and lacks the ability to clearly express them to others. Needless to say, this results in considerable frustration which just adds to Harry's learning difficulties. The test results indicate that he will need a great amount of emotional and psychological support.

These kinds of information about a child's learning style would be part of any good psychological assessment and should provide help to teacher and parent.

